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SUBJECT: VIETNAMESE GO TO THE POLLS ON MAY 20

Summary

¶1. (SBU) After an extensive vetting process, the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) approved 880 candidates to contest 500 seats in the May 20 National Assembly (NA) elections. In spite of the Party touting early on that "many more" independent (non-Communist Party) candidates would run this time around, the ratio of independents is only slightly higher than that of the election in 2002, but the ratio of "self-nominated" candidates nearly doubled. In a first for Vietnam -- and as part of the GVN's efforts to bolster its sovereignty claims in the Spratly Islands -- constituents in recently established Spratly Islands voting districts cast ballots on May 13. Several Politburo members will be on the ballots and are not expected to lose. Furthermore, some relatively well-known and outspoken former and current GVN officials, on their own or with some encouragement, decided against running. Although the election is highly scripted, the NA has become more assertive in its government oversight role, grilling ministers about their policies and failures in combating corruption. The newly elected assembly, once seated, will likely continue this trend. End Summary.

And the Finalists Are...

¶2. (SBU) After an extensive vetting process led by the Vietnam Fatherland Front (VFF) -- the Communist Party of Vietnam's (CPV) "civil society" umbrella organization -- the CPV allowed 880 candidates to contest 500 seats in the May 20 National Assembly (NA) elections. Of these candidates, 165 work at central Party organizations and GVN ministries; 291, or about 33 percent, are female; 169 belong to ethnic minority groups (19 percent); and, 154 (17.5 percent) are "independents" (non-Party members who have nonetheless been deemed "safe" by the Party). In the previous election in 2002, there were 759 candidates, of which 257 were females (close to 33 percent), 141 ethnic minorities (18.5 percent) and 121 independent (approximately 16 percent).

¶3. (SBU) In addition, the Party approved 30 "self-nominated" candidates: those who do not have the official backing of a GVN or Party entity, but who are virtually all Party members. Most of these 30 are from major cities, such as Ho Chi Minh City (seven) and Hanoi (six). The ratio of self-nominated candidates is nearly twice that of the previous election. That said, these 30 self-nominated candidates represent a sharp decrease from the 238 announced by the GVN after the second of three rounds of "consultations." Furthermore, we are aware of at least a few cases in which Party officials pressured some self-nominated candidates to withdraw or found them ineligible to run.

Stepping Into the Polling Booth

¶4. (SBU) Eligible Vietnamese voters will be able to vote between

7:00 A.M. and 7:00 P.M. on May 20. Traditionally, most voters cast their ballots in the morning before heading to the local market. Proxy voting is common, as a family member may cast votes for the whole family. In some cases during the last NA election, local election council members "escorted" those who had not yet voted to their polling stations. The overall turn-out rate for this election is likely to be over 99 percent (turnout was 99.73 percent in the 2002 election).

Voting on the Spratlys

¶15. (SBU) In a first for Vietnam -- and as part of the GVN's efforts to bolster its sovereignty claims in the Spratly Islands -- constituents in the newly established Truong Sa and Bach Long Vy Island districts (islands in the Spratly chain) in Khanh Hoa Province and Hai Phong City, respectively, cast votes on May 13. In addition, voters in two communes in Truong Sa District cast ballots for candidates to local People's Councils.

Fatherland Front Vets Candidates

¶16. (SBU) The extensive five-stage process of vetting candidates took months. The process began with the National Assembly Standing Committee (NASC) deciding on how many representatives from the various social groupings (veterans, females, intellectuals, laborers, etc.) the NA should have. After examining "qualifications," the VFF then whittled eligible candidates down to ¶880.

¶17. (SBU) A high-level contact in the Office of the National Assembly (ONA) told us that the Party's "screening process" prevented many potentially good candidates from running. Himself, for example. This contact added that "100 percent" of the ONA staff supported his

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possible candidacy during a formal conference. He nonetheless was not allowed to run, for reasons that he would not make clear.

¶18. (SBU) In spite of the Party touting early on that there would be "many more" independent candidates this time around, the ratio of independents is only slightly higher than that of the election in 2002 (17.5 percent this time, compared with 16 percent in 2002). In a May online discussion, National Assembly Vice Chairman Nguyen Van Yeu confirmed that some "independent" candidates are actually former ranking officials from CPV commissions that have been dissolved.

GVN Power Brokers "Put Their Hats in the Ring"

¶19. (SBU) Several Politburo members are "contesting" seats in the NA election: CPV General Secretary Nong Duc Manh in Thai Nguyen Province; President Nguyen Minh Triet in Ho Chi Minh City; Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung in Haiphong City; NA Chairman Nguyen Phu Trong in Hanoi; Public Security Minister Le Hong Anh in Can Tho City; and, Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Pham Gia Khiem in Danang City. They all are expected to be re-elected.

Tough to Self-Nominate

¶10. (SBU) During his May online discussion, NA Vice Chairman Yeu said self-nominated candidates, some of whom were former ranking GVN officials as well as popular scientists and teachers, withdraw their candidacies because of "voter preferences." He confirmed, however, that, in some cases, Party committees had asked individual Party members not to run. "As Party members, they are supposed to follow Party committee instructions," Yeu said.

¶11. (SBU) Of the original list of self-nominated candidates, many either elected to withdraw or did not get through the Party vetting process. Some relatively well-known -- and outspoken -- former and current GVN officials, including former Vice Minister of Natural Resources and Environment (MNRE) Dang Hung Vo, current Trade Minister Truong Dinh Tuyen and former Justice Minister Nguyen Dinh

Loc have "chosen" not to run. According to our NA contact, the CPV did not allow more self-nominated candidates to run because it feared an embarrassing scenario in which high-ranking GVN officials are defeated by possibly lower-ranking self-nominated candidates.

¶12. (SBU) Former MNRE Vice Minister Vo announced his self-nomination in March, telling local press that Nguyen Lan Dzung, a popular local professor, convinced him to do so. Professor Dzung had publicly appealed for individuals like Vo to run, saying "the NA needs delegates who are frank, devoted and knowledgeable." After declaring his candidacy, Vo said he "would not mind taking on" his own former boss at the MNRE as an NA delegate. In April, Vo decided to withdraw his candidacy, reportedly out of fear he would not survive the vetting process. This followed former Party General Secretary Le Kha Phieu's public statement welcoming Vo's intention

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to run.

¶13. (SBU) For his part, current Trade Minister Tuyen told local press in March that he had thought of applying to run for the elections as a self-nominated candidate, but later decided not to. Tuyen publicly said that one of two Party Politburo members he had talked to discouraged him from running, while the other had supported his possible candidacy. (Note: Party statutes say that Party members cannot run in the NA election unless the Party "assigns" them to run. The Communist Party Secretariat screens government employees of the rank of vice minister or above, while the Politburo approves ministers and those of higher rank. End Note.)

Comment

¶14. (SBU) Although the election is highly scripted, the National Assembly itself has become more assertive in its government oversight role, grilling ministers about their policies and failures in combating corruption. The newly elected assembly, once seated, will likely continue this trend. End Comment.

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